DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 844 CS 011 485

AUTHOR McCormack, Rachel L.
TITLE What Shall We Say When the Teacher's Away? A Look at a Second Grade Peer Response Group.
PUB DATE Dec 93
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (43rd, Charleston, SC, December 1-4, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); Elementary School Students; *Grade 2; Group Dynamics; *Peer Teaching; Primary Education; *Reader Response; Reading Research; Reading Strategies; *Small Group Instruction; Teacher Behavior
IDENTIFIERS Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

A teacher-researcher observed the behaviors and discourse of second graders in a student-led literature discussion group. A group of five students who represented the predominantly white, rural/suburban middle class community in which they lived was studied. All 22 students participated in a unit on folk and fairy tales. The case study group, along with the other peer response groups in the classroom, discussed literature selections and were exposed daily to direct instruction in reading comprehension strategies. Data included teacher logs, memos, elaborated field notes, and transcriptions of student interviews and student-led discussion sessions. Results indicated that: (1) students in the case study group demonstrated characteristics of good readers in their discussions of folk tales; (2) the students also responded aesthetically to the literature; and (3) within the social structure of the small group the roles of the students were constantly changing. Findings suggest that: with sufficient teacher modeling and support, second-grade students are able to sustain a discussion of literature without direct teacher intervention; students can articulate and demonstrate their understanding of written text; when given frequent opportunities, students in peer response groups can monitor their own discourse in relation to turn-taking, questioning, responding, elaborating, summarizing, and affirming. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 364 844

Rachel L. McCormack
Boston University

WHAT SHALL WE SAY WHEN THE TEACHER'S AWAY?
A Look at a Second Grade Peer Response Group

Running Head: Peer-Led Discussions

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. McCormack

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

CS011485

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

WHAT SHALL WE SAY WHEN THE TEACHER'S AWAY?
A Look at a Second Grade Peer Response Group

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Well before school age, children become willing participants of language. Children learn language through their social interactions at home and the process continues in the context of school, where literacy skills are refined and practiced (Gavelek, 1986). In effect, literacy learning is both a cognitive and social process. While this is not a new perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), it has met with renewed interest (Cazden, 1988).

In the social context of schooling, oral language, traditionally, has not been valued (Cullinan, 1993). At home, children initiate more conversations, ask more questions, and produce syntactically more complex utterances than at school (Wells, 1986). In a typical classroom setting, students see the dynamics of the classroom as one which is controlled by the teacher with a participation structure in which the teacher initiates, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates (Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979). In addition, the students observe the functions of the classroom discourse practiced by the teacher: (1) the opening and closing of discourse, (2) keeping attention, and (3) seeking clarification. In most classroom contexts, these functions are reserved for the teacher and rarely, if ever, are practiced by the students.

Cazden (1988) describes the potential influence of teachers to

shape language and mold student discourse while helping close the gap between home and school language. By encouraging exploratory talk and talking less themselves, teachers can provide effective support in the construction of narratives, in the participation of discussions, and in the function and use of language.

In the social context of the classroom, where peer and teacher influences are eminent, I imagined a situation in which students were provided access to the functions and use of language that, by tradition, had been reserved for me because of my status as adult and teacher. My goal was to allow my students access to those functions of language while providing an environment for them to explore their ideas--without constant supervision and evaluation.

The purpose of this study was to observe the behaviors and discourse of second-graders in a student-led literature discussion group. Through observations of and interaction with the peer response groups, I hoped to find answers to the following questions: (a) How will second-graders respond to text in peer-led discussion groups?, (b) What roles will the students adopt as they interact in the groups?, and (c) In what ways will the students benefit?

METHODS

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in my second grade classroom for four weeks during November and December, 1992. The classroom was located

in a large elementary school, in a predominantly white, rural/suburban, middle class community in southeastern Massachusetts. The 22 Anglo students in the classroom were representative of the demographics of the school in regard to socioeconomic status, race, and gender.

A target group was chosen from among the students to be the case study group. The case study group consisted of five students--two boys and three girls. The students were chosen to represent the classroom in regard to social performance and academic achievement.

Procedures

For the weeks during the study, the second-graders participated in a unit on folk and fairy tales which implemented a commercially-published anthology, multiple copies of teacher-selected trade books, and single copies of teacher-selected literature on a wide range of reading ability levels. The students were grouped according to a flexible grouping model which utilized a number of grouping configurations. The components of the model included: (1) Preparing to Read, (2) Read-Aloud of the Selection, (3) Paired Reading, (4) Peer Response Groups, (5) Individual and Group Written Responses, and (6) Whole Group Share. All students read the same materials and extra help and support was given to those students who needed it. Although all of the components of the reading program contributed to the study, it was the students' performance in the peer response groups which was the focus of the study.

The peer response groups were heterogeneous-mixed groups of five or six students. The purpose of the peer response groups was to discuss literature selections which were read in the whole group sessions. The procedure for participation in the groups was simple. The students were given a prompt to begin a discussion of the literature that had been read. Each group operated a tape player and recorded the discussion. After ten minutes they were instructed to turn the tape players off, if they had not already done so. The groups were student-led, (although no one student was chosen to lead the group), and the students monitored the construction, content, and directions of the discussions.

To prepare the students to engage in the peer response groups, the students had been, and continued to be, exposed daily to direct instruction in reading comprehension strategies. The strategies included (1) focusing attention, (2) summarizing, (3) elaborating, (4) retrieving specific information, and (5) self-monitoring. The methods of instruction included modeling, think-alouds, and guided practice. In addition, the students participated in activities which utilized alternative participation structures, where students gradually took on a more active role in questioning and responding. Finally, the students practiced taking full responsibility in two other events: (1) student-led sharing time and (2) community discussion. In these two events, student leaders were chosen to lead discussions or monitor the construction of narratives without teacher prompts or assistance. The students offered support for each other, built on each others' narratives and responses, and related the narratives to their own

experiences.

Data Sources

Data were collected and analyzed in an ongoing process utilizing qualitative research methods. I assumed the role of participant observer (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Methodological triangulation was used based on Denzin's Typology of Triangulation (Cohen and Manion, 1989).

The sources of data were many and varied and included: student interviews, playback interviews and discussions, teacher logs, memos, elaborated field notes, and student-led discussion sessions. All discussion sessions and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Each data source was analyzed for regularities, patterns, and topics in an ongoing process using a system for coding for (1) process, (2) strategies, and (3) relationships and social structures (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The data sources were cross-referenced for emerging themes. The emerging themes were related to roles, responsibility, and response.

RESULTS

The students in the case study group demonstrated characteristics

of good readers in their discussions of folk tales. These characteristics were evident in the transcripts of the audiotapes and in the students responses in the individual interviews and playback discussions. They demonstrated their ability to activate prior knowledge, they saw relationships between concepts and events, they elaborated upon details, they retrieved specific information when necessary to support their ideas, and they were able to summarize the text alone or with the help of their peers as is illustrated in the discussion following the reading of Monkey-Monkey's Trick.

01 Kelley: What was the problem in the book?

02 Elizab: Well, the monkey tricked the hyena--

03 Rachel: No! The hyena tricked the monkey!

04 Elizab: And then the hyena tricked--the monkey tricked--

05 Mike: No no! That was how they solved it.

06 Kelley: I think the problem is that he couldn't find anyone to help him.

07 Rachel: I know. That was on the first page. See? Right here.

08 Kelley: Everybody knew he had something else. That was the problem--that he couldn't find anyone to help him.

The students also responded aesthetically to the literature. They manifested their understanding of the genre of folk tales, reacted to the language and events that took place, and used their own experiences and prior knowledge to explain the text to others in their group. In a discussion about Why Mosquitoes Buzz in Peoples' Ears, they especially reacted to the 'sad' events that took place.

01 Elizab: Who thought when one of the babies died it was sad?

02 Jonathon: I did.

03 Kelley: I did, too.

04 Elizab: That was really sad.

05 Kelley: Yeah--but it was only a story.

06 Elizab: But it wasn't nice to do--even if it was a story.

07 Kelley: But, see. It was only an accident. Remember?

08 Elizab: KPOA!

09 Kelley: I think it was a good punishment.

10 Mike: Yeah--but he died. That's not a good punishment!

Within the social structure of the small group the roles of the students were constantly changing. All the students practiced the functions of discourse used in discussions and they all emerged as leaders at one time or another by engaging in task-leadership actions of contributing, asking for, summarizing, and coordinating information. Although in the end it appeared that each student had found a place within the group, it was Elizabeth who articulated the struggle she had to conform to the standards of the group and to work within the structure. In her final interview she discussed being part of the group:

"I liked the group because I learned new things and I liked to learn what it was to be in a group. It wasn't easy being in the group, you know. I learned that you can't do something if you don't know how to. Maybe if you tried it you would know what it was like to be in group, too."

CONCLUSIONS

It was evident that the students in the case study group acted and responded in ways which were the direct result of the explicit instruction they had received in the classroom. However, their responses showed their unique interactive relationships with the texts. In their own response to literature, the students then used the strategies and their experiences in transferring what they learned individually to the group for the purpose of task completion. It was the process of teacher-student and then student-student interaction that suggests the following conclusions:

1. When there has been sufficient teacher modeling and support, second grade students are able to engage in peer response groups in which the goal is to sustain a discussion of literature without direct intervention by the teacher.

2. With prior and continued instruction in reading comprehension strategies, students in peer response groups can articulate and demonstrate their understanding of written text.

3. Leadership can be defined in many ways. In peer response groups, members can become leaders by helping the group complete its task and by maintaining effective collaborative relationships.

4. When given frequent opportunities, students in peer response groups can monitor their own discourse in relation to turn-taking, questioning, responding, elaborating, summarizing, and affirming, and they are able to demonstrate a development of these behaviors over time.

While this study may present a strong case for the importance of

direct instruction of strategic reading behaviors and cooperative group practices. the conclusions from this study suggest a necessity for structural and methodological changes in elementary classrooms where teachers are the sole agents of instruction. where the standard participation structure is always practiced. and where students are rarely given the opportunity to engage in peer interaction for the purpose of task completion. learning, and problem solving. But more important. the results suggest a change in thinking--for teachers and students--in regard to their roles and responsibilities in the classroom. By adopting a philosophy of a shared effort of responsibility for learning--between teacher and student and among peers--teachers may also elect to rethink their roles and relinquish some of their control in the discussion of literature.

REFERENCES

Bogdan, R. & Biklen, S. (1992). Qualitative research for education. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Cazden, C. (1988). Classroom discourse. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cohen, L. & Manion, L. (1989). Research methods in education. New York: Routledge.

Cullinan, B.E. (1993). Children's voices: Talk in the classroom. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Gavelek, J.R. (1986). The social context of literacy and schooling: A developmental perspective. In T.E. Raphael (Ed.), The contexts of school-based literacy(pp.3-26). NY: Random House.

Mehan, H. (1979). Learning lessons. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). Mind in society. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wells, G. (1986). The meaning makers. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Children's Literature Cited

Aardema, V. (1975). Why mosquitoes buzz in people's ears. NY: Dial

McKissack, P. (1988). Monkey-monkey's trick. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin